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READING ALOUD TO STUDENTS: QUESTIONING STRATEGIES TO LISTENING COMPREHENSION

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Almost all children throughout the elementary grades respond positively to being read to (Mendoza, 1985). Many teachers consider reading aloud an important part of their daily routine, primarily so students can enjoy a good story. Being read to provides students with an opportunity to be transported across distance and time, to imagine, and to vicariously take part in experiences beyond the realm of the listener. Through such positive reading aloud experiences a variety of additional benefits are often achieved with little overt instructional support; reluctant readers may be "turned on" to reading, students may be exposed to literature beyond their reading ability and outside their typical reading interests, aural exposure to more complex and formal written syntactic patterns prepares listeners to predict these structures in future print experiences, schema is expanded through vicarious experiences, and vocabulary is increased. For the pure enjoyment derived, and these

additional benefits, reading aloud to students is an invaluable activity.

Reading aloud to students also provides the teacher with an excellent instructional opportunity to develop listening comprehension, although teachers rarely take advantage of it. Perhaps the importance of developing listening comprehension is not clearly understood. Since listening and reading are complementary communication skills, time spent on the development of listening comprehension directly benefits the development of reading comprehension (Pearson & Fielding, 1982). The student who becomes an effective listener is more likely to become an effective and fluent reader.

Teachers may not recognize the need to guide comprehension when the student is the listener and not the reader. Just as direct instruction is necessary to the development of reading comprehension (Durkin, 1978-79), listening comprehension must also be guided. When teachers demonstrate their concern for comprehension only in formal reading instruction situations, students may get the message that reading and listening to print require different levels of involvement and understanding. Certainly, teachers expect students to comprehend what is read to them. A few minutes of guided instruction may enhance the quality of the listening experience.

Perhaps teachers do not want to infringe on the pure pleasure of the listening experience. Guiding comprehension can occur in many subtle ways which do not detract from the enjoyment of being read to. Some comprehension strategies can be as much fun as the listening experience itself. Every passage of print, whether read or listened to, should not and does not need to be elaborated or dissected. Nor do we suggest that everytime you read aloud you need to implement a listening comprehension strategy. But, when concepts are difficult or ideas bear thinking about, when appropriate, it is your obligation to guide the comprehension of the literature you select to read aloud to your students.

Developing Comprehension Through Questioning

Teachers use many strategies to develop comprehension. However, since the time of Socrates, questioning has remained the most common means of extending the thinking

process. Walk into any classroom and you will witness the ritual teacher-question, student-response format. Although questioning is second nature to teachers, many teachers are not effective questioners.

In most questioning situations, teachers automatically focus the majority of questions at the literal level, eliciting only superficial understanding and overemphasizing trivial detail (Guszak, 1967; Gall, 1970). When reading aloud to students, perhaps more common than recall questions, teachers ask listeners for affective responses to the story (e.g., Did you like the story? Which character did you like best? What was your favorite part of the story? etc.). Neither literal nor affective level questions are sufficient by themselves to extend the listener's understanding of the text.

Knowing how to ask effective questions is an essential teacher skill. Effective questions focus and extend thinking to higher cognitive levels. Such questions elicit longer oral language responses in which students "collect their thoughts" (Smith, 1976). Lindfors (1980) suggests that oral language is a powerful tool to be used in the development of comprehension and learning. Good questions stimulate language interaction from which "our theory of our world grows and changes as we encounter others' experiences, interpretations, and ideas." (p. 246)

The following guidelines for developing effective questions are appropriate to use before, during, and after reading literature aloud to students. Implementing one or more of these techniques occasionally when you read to your students should facilitate the listening/thinking process and extend comprehension through oral language exploration.

Questioning Prior to Reading Aloud

Psycholinguists believe reading comprehension is directly related to what the reader brings to print. All information is comprehended by relating new information to that which is known (Goodman, 1967; Smith, 1975). Concepts derived from past experiences are organized in a kind of filing system in our heads called schema. Schema which is unique to the individual plays an integral role in comprehension (Strange, 1980). Prior knowledge aids in making inferences as the story unfolds (McIntosh, 1985). This is true for the listener as well as the reader. Students should be able

to relate to and predict what is read to them more easily when schema is well-developed and called up prior to readings.

Before reading literature aloud to students, the teacher must prime the schema. Questions which elicit what students know about a topic, the story grammar, and the author can be helpful in predicting print. For example, before reading Julie of the Wolves by Jean Craighead George --appropriate schema-orienting questions to ask the students would be:

- What do you know about wolves?
- What might a story entitled Julie of the Wolves be about?
- What kind of conflicts might be found in this book?
- Has anyone read anything else by Jean Craighead George? What were those books about?

These are the same kinds of questions fluent readers subconsciously ask themselves when selecting books from library shelves. Such background information facilitates comprehension as the listener interacts with the story. It is important to remember that each student's schema will be different. Sometimes there may be little or no schema, especially when the listener's cultural background differs from the story (Strange, 1980). By asking schema-orienting questions, the teacher helps students to call up schema, to realize what each student individually knows, and to develop through oral language interactions a collective knowledge of the subject and author. The teacher also has the opportunity to fill in schema that is sketchy, or correct misconceptions before the reading. Listeners will be able to make appropriate predictions about the story based on this schematic understanding.

Questions After Reading Aloud

Questions which follow reading should stimulate thinking about the relevant concepts found in the text. Because the level of the question asked has a direct effect on the extent and thinking level of the response (Wixson, 1983), questions must be carefully asked to elicit the desired levels of thought.

Literal level questions focus on textually explicit information. Because the answers are found in the text,

literal questions offer little opportunity for discussion. Inferential questions focus on textually implicit information which is only implied within the text. There is latitude in answering inferential questions, for there is generally a range of correct answers. The same clues may lead to different conclusions by the listener. Evaluative questions call for interactions to be made between textual information and the schema of the reader. Answers are formulated by making judgments based on the reader's knowledge and attitudes of the world as well as the comprehension of the story. Answers to evaluative questions vary and are correct as long as the listener can justify the answer. Creative questions are the "What might happen if..." questions which change the text in some way, going beyond the author's conceptions. When responding to creative questions, the listener changes roles; the listener becomes the storyteller. Each student develops a scenario, and every answer is equally acceptable. Creative questions provide an excellent vehicle to elicit oral language in a totally unevaluated context.

Most students generally can answer literal questions with ease. Inferential questions pose serious comprehension blocks at any age level. However, even young children (Hansen, 1981) and poor readers (Hansen & Hubbard, 1984) can be guided to make inferences. Guiding comprehension to critical thinking levels requires that the teacher sequence questions in such a way as to promote success (Smith, 1976; Carr, 1983). Developing questions in question clusters builds critical thinking on a literal understanding of the concept (Alexander, 1979); Taba, 1965).

A question cluster composed of a literal, inferential, evaluative, and creative level question asked after reading a chapter of an episodic book can be effective in extending listening comprehension. Such an LIEC question cluster takes one concept of the story, focuses thinking, then raises thinking to the next level. In the question cluster concept, all levels are important. Literal questions generate factual understanding upon which inferences are based. Evaluative questions provide listeners with the opportunity to evaluate concepts on text-based and/or schema-based criteria. Creative questions provide essential listener to author connections.

This excerpt taken from A Gathering of Days by Joan

W. Blois is used as the text for the sample question cluster which follows:

April Fool's Day, 1831!

Matty and I played a great prank on our father this morning. Yesterday on conceiving the trick, I pared down a firm ripe turnip to resemble the end of a candle. After we all had retired last night, and making sure he preceded us in sleep, we tiptoed down and, with our "candle," replaced the one he uses daily to start the morning fire.

As soon as we'd heard a noise below--we'd scarcely slept a wink all night for fear that we should miss it--Matty and I wrapped up in quilts and crept to the foot of the stair.

He applied the flint for the longest time. But the "candle" would not burn. It happened that the early dark helped preserve our secret. Altho' he peered at it several times he did not detect the replacement! Now indeed did he lose his temper, calling on spirits of every sort, and cursing the damp of a Springtime morning which made the wick --or so he thought--so stubborn and refractory to the flint's persuasion. (page 59)

Literal - What was Catherine and Matty's April Fool's joke?

Inferential - What did their father think had happened?

Evaluative - Was this a good April Fool's joke? Why?

Creative - What might have happened if their father had observed Catherine and Matty replacing the candle the night before?

Questioning While Reading Aloud

In most questioning procedures the teacher questions and the student responds. However, when students generate questions, both general questions about story grammar and story-specific questions, comprehension has improved (Singer & Donlan, 1982). Such strategies allow for increased student activity and can be used at all grade levels. Even students in the primary grades have been successfully trained to ask questions at higher thinking levels (Cohen, 1983). Re-Quest and inQuest are two student-questioning techniques that can be easily adapted for use during the reading aloud process.

The ReQuest Procedure (Manzo, 1969, 1985) has two distinct parts. It is from the first part, Reciprocal Questioning, that the procedure derives its name. Students are asked to listen and to formulate questions they can ask the teacher after each page is read aloud. In this role reversal situation, the student tries to stump the teacher. As the teacher answers each student's question, reinforcement of higher level questions occurs in two ways. The teacher overtly reinforces critical thinking questions with praise ("Good question!" or "That really made me think!" etc.). A second more subtle reinforcement is tied to the length of response. Longer explanations required of higher level questions are more reinforcing to the questioner. After student questions have been exhausted, the teacher may ask the students any other questions about the text. As questioner, the teacher models only higher level thinking questions.

After using these reciprocal questioning procedures for several pages, students are asked to predict the outcome of the story as the second part of the procedure. The teacher records all guesses about possible scenarios. Then students vote for the ending they think is most probable. Each student's concept of story, developed through many listening/reading experiences with print, provides the basis for accurate prediction and establishes the criteria for evaluating each scenario as realistic/unrealistic. After ReQuest, students listen as the teacher reads the rest of the story to determine which of the predictions was most accurate.

ReQuest provides a strategy for listening/reading. Guiding students to ask higher level thinking questions and to make predictions and evaluate them stimulates complex cognitive processing.

The InQuest Procedure (Shoop, 1985) combines student questioning with spontaneous drama to develop comprehension. In the first phase of this procedure, students learn the art of Investigative Questioning by viewing and evaluating questioning techniques of television news reporters. Videotapes of local/national newscasts or presidential newsconferences can be edited to demonstrate "good" investigative questioning procedures. Students use these models to construct similar questions that elicit not only information from the person being interviewed, but also

projections and evaluations.

This questioning skill is then used by students while the teacher is reading aloud in the application phase of the procedure. At a critical incident in the story, the teacher asks a volunteer to assume one of the character parts in the story. While maintaining the character role and using the information based only on the plot, the character must answer questions posed by other class members. At other points in the reading aloud process, different characters may be interviewed. In this manner, events are analyzed from different characters' viewpoints.

In the evaluation phase following the interviewing, students evaluate the question-answer exchanges and are guided to understand that a successful interviewer delves beneath the surface events. "Good" investigative questioning leads to interpretations of the character's motivations and feelings as well as predictions of future actions.

Procedures such as ReQuest and InQuest in which students ask questions promote more than overt oral language interactions. When students ask questions, they also process their own answers in their heads. Students talk to themselves, asking and answering questions and evaluating the quality of the questions. Interiorizing the question-answer-evaluation interchange is the essential tool of meta-cognitive processing which enables the listener/reader to develop control of the comprehension process.

Beyond Questioning

Perhaps the most critical point made by Durkin (1978-79) regarding comprehension instruction is the importance of teaching students how to comprehend. Questions are asked to stimulate thought. However, it is often the answer that is the focus of the teacher's concern, rather than the thinking that led to that answer. It is the product that receives the teacher's attention and not the process. To teach comprehension is to demonstrate, to model, to show the thinking behind the answer--the process as well as the product. When the answer to a question is the **end** in and of itself, then the question is used as a tool of assessment to determine how well the student can comprehend. A question is a tool of instruction only when the process of getting the answer is as much a concern as the answer itself.

When using an LIEC question cluster, after the question-answer interchange, a teacher can assist students in verbalizing this "inside the head" process by asking, "How did you get your answer?" or "What made you think that?" This sparks the "think aloud" process that elicits the thinking behind the answer. In the ReQuest Procedure, the teacher is afforded an opportunity to model metacognitive processing while answering student questions that require inferring. As a fluent reader/listener the teacher demonstrates by "thinking aloud" how clues are pulled out of the text for inferential thinking and what is known and what is not known at different points within the text. By phrasing answers with "I think that..." or "I'm not sure I know enough yet, but I would guess..." etc., the teacher models the process of analyzing and predicting print (Fitzgerald, 1983; Collins & Smith, 1980). Teacher and student modeling of the thinking/comprehending process is a necessary part of comprehension instruction.

Reading literature to students is an important part of a total reading program. Teachers need to realize that students can listen to enjoy a book and at the same time be guided to better comprehension. Just as reading comprehension must be taught, so must listening comprehension. The development of listening skills may provide a necessary scaffold for the development of effective reading skills. By occasionally selecting a questioning strategy to use when literature is to be read aloud to students, meaningful thinking/listening experiences will be fostered.

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